

# Have We Learned Anything at All Since the Great War?

This coming month marks the centenary of the entry of the United States into World War I. In an address to Congress, President Woodrow Wilson had asked for “a war to end all wars” that would “make the world safe for democracy”.

In retrospect, such words sound ridiculous.

The First World War paved the way for a Second World War less than twenty years later and the world, far from being made safe for democracy, lurched into a period of totalitarianism. Indeed, and even more ironically, it is likely that the Bolshevik Revolution would not have happened if it had not been for World War I, and that Hitler would not have risen to power if it had not been for the unjust peace forced upon Germany by the Treaty of Versailles. “After ‘the war to end war’,” wrote Field Marshall Wavell of the Versailles Treaty, “they seem to have been in Paris making ‘the Peace to end Peace’.” It would, therefore, be more accurate of World War I to describe it as “a war to cause more wars” that would “make the world safe for tyranny”.

To be fair to President Wilson, he did not coin the inane phrase that the First World War, or the Great War as it was then called, would be “a war to end war”. That dubious claim to fame belongs to H. G. Wells. In August 1914, just as the war was beginning, Wells, in full jingoistic voice, published a number of newspaper articles which would be published subsequently as a book entitled *The War that Will End War*. Later, in 1918, in another book about the war, he used the shorter phrase, “the war to end war”. It is singularly appropriate that Wells should be responsible for such crass naiveté. He was what might be called a progressive optimist, or an optimistic progressive, whose view that humanity was

proceeding to a future golden age in which superstition and religion would be replaced by the wisdom of the scientist was encapsulated in his bestselling two-volume book, *The Outline of History* (1920). Not surprisingly, as events unfolded, Wells found his optimism and progressivism unsustainable. In his final book, aptly titled *The Mind at the End of Its Tether* (1945), he succumbed to a radical pessimism, describing the period of World War II (the war that could never happen!) as “The Age of Frustration”.

In the same year in which Wells was at the end of his tether, squirming in abject frustration, another writer, Siegfried Sassoon, who had served in the trenches of World War I, wrote “The Litany of the Lost” as an expression of horror at a world gone dark with devildom, a world overshadowed by the mushroom clouds looming over Hiroshima and Nagasaki:

*In breaking of belief in human good;*

*In slavery of mankind to the machine;*

*In havoc of hideous tyranny withstood,*

*And terror of atomic doom foreseen;*

*Deliver us from ourselves.*

Battle-seasoned and war-weary, Sassoon harboured no illusions that the second of the century’s global conflagrations would be a war to end war. On the contrary, the new weapons of mass destruction that scientists had invented meant that the world had lurched from world war to Cold War, in which the strategy for “peace” was “mutually assured destruction”, literally and acronymically MAD!

Sassoon knew that science could not bring progress in the absence of virtue, and that there could not be peace between nations until there was peace between people. Contrary to Wells’ scientism, with its faith in the inexorable progress of

omnipotent science, Sassoon believed that true progress required a return to the traditional values taught by the wisdom of the ages as expressed in the wisdom of the sages. Far from reaching for the stars, as in one of Wells' sci-fi fantasies, humanity had to rediscover its roots:

*Chained to the wheel of progress uncontrolled;  
World masterers with a foolish frightened face;  
Loud speakers, leaderless and sceptic-souled;  
Aeroplane angels, crashed from glory and grace;  
Deliver us from ourselves.*

*In blood and bone contentiousness of nations,  
And commerce's competitive re-start,  
Armed with our marvellous monkey innovations,  
And unregenerate still in head and heart;  
Deliver us from ourselves.*

*Joseph Pearce's verse drama, Death Comes for the War Poets, based on the life of Siegfried Sassoon, is being presented by the Blackfriars Repertory Theater at the Sheen Center for Thought and Culture in New York City from June 9 to June 24 ([www.blackfriarsrep.com](http://www.blackfriarsrep.com)).*

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